This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

WIDENER LIBRARY
HX 4TZF 4

Messalina

A
Tragedy
In Five Acts

By
Algernon Sydney Logan

Digitized by Google

DAL 2382.5.10

Harvard College Library

FROM

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL,

Class of 1838.

14 Nov., 1891.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA:

A TRAGEDY IN FIVE ACTS.

BY

ALGERNON SYDNEY LOGAN,

AUTHOR OF "SAUL," "A FEATHER FROM THE WORLD'S WING," "JESUS IN MODERN LIFE," ETC.

PHILADELPHIA:
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY.
1890.

Digitized by Google

AL 2382.5.10

Harvard College Library
Nov. 14, 1891.
LOWELL BEQUEST.

Copyright, 1890, by J. B. Lippincott Company.

All rights reserved.

Digitized by Google

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

TIBERIUS CLAUDIUS DRUSUS CÆSAR,* fifth Emperor of Rome.
NARCISSUS, a freedman, secretary to Claudius.
PALLAS, comptroller of his household.
CALLISTUS, a freedman, favorite of the Emperor.
HALOTUS, his food-taster.
CAIUS SILIUS, a patrician, the consul-elect.
VESTIUS VALENS, a young noble, friend of Silius.
GETA, commander of the Prætorian guards.
VALERIA MESSALINA, wife of the Emperor, and also his cousin.
LEPIDA, her mother.
Soldiers, attendants, slaves, etc.

Scene, Rome, in the year 801 of the city (A.D. 48). The action occupies about eight days.

* There is collateral evidence that the upper part of Claudius's face was noble, but the lower part weak and exceedingly sensual. It is known, besides, that his appearance when at rest was majestic, but that when he moved about he was undignified and awkward.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

ACT I.

SCENE I.

A hall in the Imperial Palace.

NARCISSUS (*solus*).

So now I have a moment here alone.
It is not often that such moments come,—
In fact, so seldom that I am obliged
To shake myself to prove I am awake;
To pinch my mind, to prove that it is firm
And real and sound, and my own proper self,
And not half merged in the poor part I play.
It is a comfort, too, to talk out loud,

Digitized by Google

Myself unto myself, as I have done
From childhood; for it has a good effect,—
It gives consistency, resistance, force,
To my own inner life, which has to hold
Its own against the whirling life around,
Of which I make myself a constant part,
A part so perfect that I sometimes fear
My own identity is fading. But
It seems to thrive upon a food called hate
Which Contrast brings to me—a contrast strong—
That is, between myself, possessed of powers
Fitted to make some impress on our time,
Debarred from every noble aim, cut off
From every post of real dignity,
As much as the poor eunuch is from love;
And close beside me hundreds, languid, dull,
Debauched, depraved, inane, whom the law says
Are free competitors in honor's race.
What is the power I have, or may obtain?
It is to roll about for many feet
To trample on; and cringe, and cringe, and cringe;
And bow and bend; and whisper every word
That I would speak, and speak what I would roar;

Digitized by Google

And be the thing of one whom I despise—
That's dangerous!—and be his nothing, too,
If he so wills. There is no greater pain
Than a mind working, working day and night
Without a natural outlet. Evil is
In me no evil, hatred is not hate;
I cannot choose but hate the lives I feel
Legally crushing mine: and *how* I hate!
I wish this building would come toppling down
On me and all within it. I possess
At least a love to balance all this hate,
A love as strong, as real, and as true,—
The only one allowed me,—for myself.
A love unshared by aught in human shape—
No—yes—unshared? She is so mortal fair!
It makes me catch my breath to think of her.
If love and longing are the same, I love.
In any case, 'tis death or victory.
But then to win in such a case as this,
Where victory is so far, demands an eye
Of piercing gaze. It is a sorry sight
To see a mind well framed to govern men,
And rule with justice and discernment, driven

Digitized by Google

To find an outlet in most desperate schemes
To win a paltry woman. Let it be
Some comfort that she is her kind in one—
Passion's epitome—all sex condensed.
She wakes that love imbued with sex, which gives
Fire and force to those who have some aim
Worthy their higher powers; but on minds
Confined and cramped and driven within, like mine,
It acts as a corrosive, subtle poison.
Well, she shall never be my only aim;
For power is sweet, though won by self-contempt.
She is absorbed in Silius, that is plain;
It may be only fancy, but I hear
A something in her tone, when meant for him,
It never takes for others: but the look
She flashed on Valens, not two nights ago!
'Twas but a sidelong glance, but it contained,
Oh, what a knowledge, masterful, complete,
Intelligent, clear, boundless, of the world
Of Pleasure and of Passion, and of all
The troubling thoughts within their empire! Oh,
I would give years of life for such a look!
I shall not win it by remaining here.

Digitized by Google

I must keep near to Silius and to her,
And watch and wait, and still unravel slowly
The garment of their passion thread by thread,
To wear at last its tatters for my own.

Exit.

SCENE II.

Enter VALENS.

VALENS.

I wonder what Narcissus, that dark bird
Of evil flight, sinister from his birth,
Was doing here. How I do wish that I
Had been a little closer—for I heard
(I'm sure of that) voices, conversing low,
And yet I only saw him flit away.

A female slave approaches hesitatingly.

By Hercules! come quickly, girl—'tis safe—
There's no one here—tell me at once your news.
Is it good or bad? my heart can wait no longer—
'Tis sick with waiting.

Digitized by Google

SLAVE.

It is wholly good,
If pleasure is a good, which is but pain.

VALENS.

How now, my young philosopher, you must
Have tried delight most carefully, to know
So much about it. I shall be well pleased
To try it with you when I can find time—
But let me have your news.

SLAVE.

You are to come,
When the moon sets, to the north postern, where
You will be met, and brought through winding ways,
In quiet and in safety, to the room
Where she who loves you will be waiting.

VALENS.

Oh,
This is too heavenly! I must be alone,
To think it over before it comes to pass,

Digitized by Google

And multiply my pleasure; and the mind
Should do the same with pleasure past, and dwell
Upon each tittle of our joy, until
Our life o'erflows with it.—Hark! what is that?
I thought I heard a step.—Yes, it draws near—
'Tis Silius! Hasten, fly! *Exit slave.*

Enter SILIUS.

SILIUS.

Who is that slave
I saw you talking with? It seems to me
That I have seen her somewhere; is she not
A servant of the Empress?

VALENS.

You should know.
For my part, I cannot inform you.

SILIUS.

She
Seemed giving you some message.

Digitized by Google

VALENS.

You mistake:
'Twas I was trying hard to give to her
A message for herself alone—of love—
Good solid love, not too refined or thin,
Pouring it molten hot into her ears;
But she despised my begging blandishments,
And flouted me and fled.

SILIUS.

Ah,—was that it?
Tell me the latest news. You always are
The one to know it; thanks to your quick eye
Which misses nothing, and brings all things home
For your clear head to judge them.

VALENS.

Well, I own
The meshes of my mind are rather fine,
But catch more drift than fishes. The only news
I know of is that you are grown so large

Digitized by Google

The State looks somewhat smaller than before;
Or, if we use another metaphor,
I might remark that you have climbed so high
That one might think another in your place
Would feel a little dizziness or so.

SILIUS.

I have no power.

VALENS.

No, but you will have.
What use do you intend to make of it?

SILIUS.

I am not anxious to attain to it.
Power is an ugly peak, differing in this
From other heights, that it has no descent:
You must remain, or tumble headlong down;
You cannot climb down gently.

VALENS.

If you fall,
Many in Rome will suffer. For my part,—

Digitized by Google

You know how I have loved you, and how long,—
But since that speech of yours which shook all Rome,
And even aroused the Senate from its sleep,
I feel a new and deeper admiration
For your great gifts. I have made up my mind
To stand or fall with you.
But come, tell me,
Is it, then, true that she I dare not name
Not only fancies you, but loves you, too,
With her whole heart and soul; and giving up
All her past life, has vowed herself to you,
As purely, utterly, exclusively,
As any vestal to her sacred shrine?
Is all this true?

SILIUS.

Why ask me, since you know
I cannot answer you?

VALENS.

Why not, I pray?
You know her name has long been used by all
As common property.

Digitized by Google

SILIUS.

More reason, then,
Why I should keep it sacred.

VALENS.

But you know
She talks herself, from morning until night,
Of all she does—and it is much—and all
She thinks and feels, and, they say, all she *hopes*.

SILIUS.

You know that honor bears small tampering,
And least of all where women are concerned.
I made a rule, when first I donned the robe
Which made me man, never to break a trust
Reposed by any woman, be she queen,
Or slave, or public vendor of her charms.
You know I love you, Valens, and you know
'Tis not from any lack of confidence
I still keep silent.—Should an hour come
When you can aid me, may I hope to find
Your old support and friendship?

Digitized by Google

VALENS, *grasping his hand.*

Yes, you may!

SILIUS.

Come, it is growing late. We will go back
To my house; and there have a little feast—
Nothing uproarious, but select and sound—
A few choice dancing girls, and some good wine
Undrugged with water, and some dishes framed
To be the gods of all the world of food.
What say you?

VALENS, *constrainedly.*

No, I cannot come to-night.

SILIUS.

Why, what's the matter?

VALENS.

Nothing much, I have
Some business which will keep me very late.

Digitized by Google

SILIUS.

But it cannot be here.

VALENS.

Oh, no, not here;
Only I must go out by the back door,
It lies more in my way.

SILIUS.

It seems that you
Have taken up my lecture on the sex,
And put it into sudden practice, too.
I wish you all success. I hope that she
Is fair as your best dreams. Good-night!

Exit SILIUS.

VALENS.

Good-night!
If you but knew how fair, I think my chances
Were good to meet with Charon ere the dawn.
Within three hours I shall be there! It is
Too much—it stifles me to think of it.

Glances around furtively and steals away.

Digitized by Google

SCENE III.

MESSALINA'S *apartment in the palace.* MESSALINA *discovered admiring herself in a polished mirror.* *Enter* SILIUS.

MESSALINA.

I'd know that foot-fall 'midst a legion.—Ah!
Sinks upon his breast, sighing.

SILIUS.

Oh, this is too delicious! such delight
Is almost pain: it seems so long—so long—
Since we last met: I can but gasp—each nerve
Was limp and dull and dead for want of you!
And now—they drink your touch. O heaven! I must
Be still, until my body can regain—
Some balance— *A pause.*
Even when thick folds of cloth
Divide our persons, it is still the same—
What matters it? for I am able still

Digitized by Google

To feel through mine the ripple of your blood,
And in your lightest touch to feel, know, see,
All we have ever felt before, endured,
Known, suffered, understood,—all gathered there,
Compressed, condensed, and then hurled forth, to flash
In one hot lightning thrill throughout my frame.

Drawing her down upon his knee.

When I am with you how the hours fly!
They are like Mercuries who scud along,
Running and flying with a following wind;
But when you are away, the hours lie cold,
Like gladiators dead, to be at last
Dragged off by Time. But why are you so still?
Do you not feel so?

MESSALINA.

Yes, and even more.
With us, in love and grief 'tis much the same—
Woman is silent if she greatly feels.
Her silence is herself, and she the strong,
Deep, living passion which awakes in man
Wild thoughts and words. She is the voiceless cloud

Digitized by Google

Through which the thunder rolls; or like the pine
Which lends the wind his music; or the vale,
Silent and still, which by its slope gives life,
Motion, speed, fury, to the bounding stream
Of man's loud passion; or she is the shore
Where man's desire rolls, and finds a voice.

SILIUS.

To break at last in foam,—foam scattered far,
Lost, unrecoverable; yes, of all
Your similes this last one is the best,
Because the end is nearest life's result.
Men ever try to fix what in itself
Is utterly unfixable, and strive
To press, mould, chisel to a lasting form,
An amorous woman, that swift-driving mist
And many-colored vapor.

MESSALINA.

Hush, for shame!
How can you speak so? when you know that I
Have lately begged of you to fix my heart—

Digitized by Google

Which needs no fixing—by a sacred tie
Checking the very possibility
Of change, making me yours beyond recall.

SILIUS.

You mean what we last spoke of?

MESSALINA.

Yes.

SILIUS.

You mean
A marriage solemnized in public?

MESSALINA.

Yes.

SILIUS.

It is a desperate venture.

MESSALINA.

Not at all.
All will declare for us, for you must see
That Rome is restless and dissatisfied.

Digitized by Google

You know this journey Claudius means to take
To Ostia; if he waver at the last,
I will contrive that he shall go,—and then,
Once wedded, Rome will be our own!

SILIUS.

You say
That all will join with us; but who are all?
What steps are taken? what is clear and sure?

MESSALINA.

No direct steps; but I have watched until
My instinct tells me that we cannot fail.
You know what Claudius is: a sage, an ape,
A mountebank, a just, an unjust judge,
An orator, an author and a fool,—
All pounded into one, yet mixed so ill
That each appears by turns. His clemency,
Always misplaced, and his severity,
Always ill-timed, have steadily divorced
Love from him upon all sides.

Digitized by Google

SILIUS.

That is true,
But has it flown to us?

MESSALINA.

You are so cold!

SILIUS.

I cold! But come, Valeria, tell me plainly
What you would do. I know that frequently
You have hinted at this marriage; now it seems
That you propose it to take place at once,
Instantly,—for you know that Cæsar leaves,
Or he may leave, within a day or two.
What are your plans? for you must have some plan.

MESSALINA.

My plan is a quick blow: 'tis twice as safe
As long-laid plots and complicated schemes,
Which fail and break in two half-way,
Frustrated in the working. I would call

Digitized by Google

Augurs and all our friends, and solemnize
A public marriage, with befitting pomp
And every outward circumstance; and when
We climb the steps (you know what steps I mean)
There's not a power in all official Rome
But will proclaim us sovereigns. As for *him*,
Dazzled and dazed, and losing heart at once,
As is his custom, he will suddenly
Take ship from Ostia; that will give us time
To fortify our power, appoint our friends
To all the highest offices, and send
Orders to take him when he lands.

SILIUS.

Your plan
Is a fine superstructure, but it seems
To lack that firm foundation which is found
To underlie successful plots.

MESSALINA, *starting.*

What's that!
Some one was moving then—I heard a noise;
Everything seems unsettled in the palace,

Digitized by Google

And I am nervous and unhinged to-night—
Let's talk of this to-morrow—no, to-morrow.
I cannot keep you longer, love: 'tis late,
And you must leave me.

SILIUS.

What, not now!

MESSALINA.

Yes, now.

SILIUS.

What is the matter?

MESSALINA, *confusedly.*

Why,—the Emperor—
He said he would not come, and now I learn
That he is coming—that he may arrive
At any moment.

SILIUS.

This is hard to bear.
I thought we had the night before us—well,

Digitized by Google

It must be borne—but it is horrible
To leave you thus, my thoughts in disarray,
My nerves unslaked, the fibres of my frame
In false relation.—When for many days
I am away from you, the impulses
Which are my springs of life grow weak and slow,
As the great nervous strength which you have given
Ebbs gradually away; and now I had
But just begun to feel some energy—
But this is vain! Come, give me, as I go,
Kisses for every step.

MESSALINA, *hesitating.*

Suppose I should
Send word to Claudius that I am not well,
Would you, then, love me more than ever, more
Than you believed you could?

SILIUS.

Hush, hush, be still.
You should not tempt me,—it might ruin us.
Good-night, my love. *Exit* SILIUS.

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

Good-night! Oh, how
I hate myself for this! Caius, come back!
But no, it is too late: I could not well
Stop Valens' coming if I wished; besides,
'Tis better to quite wear out pleasure's garments,
And then reclothe my heart for him I love.

SCENE IV.

MESSALINA'S *apartment.*
MESSALINA *is reclining voluptuously, while a female slave timidly arranges her hair.*

MESSALINA.

You seem more skilful than you were last night;
It is a pleasure when you do it well,
It soothes and makes me drowsy.—Have a care!
You plucked a little then.—Stop shaking so!
I cannot feel you now; your touch has grown
Light and unpleasant, like a spider's web
Catching upon me.—No.—I need a stroke

Digitized by Google

Gentle and yet quite strong and firm—
Will you still hurt me me so? Take that, then!

Plucks a small dagger from her belt, and strikes her.

SLAVE.

Oh!

The slave-girl reels and falls fainting.

MESSALINA, *turning away from her.*

Oh, agony of soul, to find myself
Tainted once more with crime! I'd gladly give
A province to undo this moment's work.
My love of pleasure has me by the throat,—
I am prepared to yield to it; but why
Must it drag other passions in, not mine,
And fling their weight upon my spirit, till,
Writhing in torment, it sinks whirling down,
Faster, yes, ever faster—

The slave moans.

The poor child!
I had forgotten her.

Strikes on a shield.

Digitized by Google

Attendants appear.

Take up this girl,
And do the very best for her you can.
She hurt herself; but 'tis not mortal.

Exeunt.

Yes,
I loathe this dread responsibility
Of living through no will except my own,
With no authority to fear yet love,
No hand to curb yet guide me.—Where could I
Find such an influence?—In Silius?
Perhaps; but no, there follows in his path
A gust of passion, and 'tis passion's breath
Has withered up my soul.—My mother, then?
That were a fairer hope; but then it is
Too late by far.—Yet it were sweet to try;
To sob myself asleep upon her breast,
And have her, with her cool and gentle hand,
Smooth all the fevered thoughts from out my brain—
Yes, this might be.

Enter attendant.

Digitized by Google

ATTENDANT.

The lady Lepida,
Your mother, waits without, and begs to know
If she may speak with you.

MESSALINA.

Well, did you say
That I was here?

ATTENDANT.

I did, my Empress.

MESSALINA.

You had no orders to. Could you not say
That you would see? If any one should come
While she is here,—you understand me.—Go,
Tell her to enter.

Exit attendant.

What unlucky chance
Has brought her here just now? just at the time
When Valens may arrive at any moment.

Digitized by Google

Enter LEPIDA *in a chair with four bearers. They set down the chair, and* LEPIDA, *stepping from it, advances quickly towards her daughter.*

LEPIDA, *to the bearers.*

Await without.

They take up the chair, and retire.

Valeria, my dear child,—
For you are still my child, whatever you do,
And dear to me, besides,—come, sit by me;
I will not tire you, so do not chafe.
I come because the spring of mother's love
Welling up in my heart o'erflows my lips,—
I cannot remain silent. Are you not
(It seems but yesterday) the self-same child
That used to nestle with your silky locks
Upon my heart, and bid me sing to you,
And yield obedience to my lightest wish

MESSALINA.

Obedience! that is not a pleasant word.

Digitized by Google

LEPIDA.

It is a sweet and gentle word, because
In giving up to me you only yield
To your own better nature. For you *have*
A fair side to your nature; and I come
To find the access to it, and to win
You back to be no longer what you are,
And to become what you were born to be.
Change for my sake, Valeria, change at once,—
It is much easier by a sudden break
Than to effect it inch by inch. I know
When you begin a settled life, it may
Seem dull at first; but in a little while
You will be glad, you'll thank me for it,—I
Promise you peace and perfect happiness.

MESSALINA.

Oh, pray do not begin to lecture me!

LEPIDA.

To lecture you! When I come here in love
And perfect gentleness, to win you back

Digitized by Google

By tears and prayers, when I could easily
Command you as your mother?

MESSALINA.

And I, too,
Could as your empress—but I am, you know—
Order you to be silent.

LEPIDA.

Just as well
Could you command your many sins and crimes
To hold their peace!—But why do you—for I
Will crush my anger back—why do you choose
To scorn me and my counsels and reproofs,
And lead a life so fraught to me with pain?

MESSALINA.

Because it is so pleasant.

LEPIDA.

Oh, for shame!
To think that I should have produced a thing
To bring contempt forever on our house!

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

I wish that you would talk of something else,
Or come to me to-morrow.

LEPIDA.

Such a speech
Addressed to me! and when you know 'tis now
More than a month since last we met—O heaven!
Patience were now a crime! and mine is gone—
Now I will speak until, Valeria,
You hang your head in silence and in shame.
Why, not content with pleasures such as come
Within your reach (disgraceful in themselves,
But not quite patent to the world at large),
Will you send forth your appetite, and make
All Rome your passion's garden, there to cull
Men even as flowers; and so make yourself
The property of those whom you despise,
And our old name a thing of scorn, till I
Would gladly tear it off, and trample it
Beneath my heel, deep in oblivion's dust,
If I could pluck it from me?

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

Since you have
Committed the imprudence to inquire,
I will reply and make my answer plain.
You know that all girls deem their mother pure,
Or are supposed to think so, and so I
Am doubtful, as I am in honor bound,
Whether in your own youthful, palmy days,
You had the self-same taste—well-poised and keen,
Discriminating, studiously formed—
For men that I have; but, for argument,
Let us suppose you had. Then you will know
That many men receive from Nature's hand
One gift in strange perfection, and a few
Are blessed with a great number; but not one
Has all endowments equally, and all
Perfect, without a flaw. I look abroad
And see one man who has a leg which makes
His spring like a bird's flight; another has
An arm like Hercules; and still a third
Has a grand torso, all in knotted welts
Of sculptured muscle. Here I see a man

Digitized by Google

Of god-like intellect, and then I meet
With one who is the exponent of the soul;
Another is but passion made alive,
Passion quick, frantic, tireless, and strong.
Now, if you will but grant me magic power,
Some wondrous alchemy, by which I may
Pluck his perfection from each one, and throw
These all into a crucible, and raise
One being from their ashes, who shall hold
Within himself those gifts which just before
Were parcelled 'mongst a thousand, but in him
Condensed, sublimed, comingled, ne'er to fade,
Then will I give myself to him alone,
Never to wander more.

LEPIDA.

Oh, monstrous thought!
Valeria, you have gone one step too far:
This insult is the last of many, and
It is the last you ever give to me.
My love has flown, far seeking, o'er your soul,
And, like a weary bird, comes back to me.
I go; and never more shall I return,

Digitized by Google

Till your proud heart lies supine in the dust,
Choking and bleeding, praying for my aid.
I now perceive that you are wholly lost;
And, since no other medicine will serve,
I here call down the vengeance of the gods,
And beg them hearken to a mother's curse!

MESSALINA.

No, no, not that!

LEPIDA.

It is too late; stand back!
May you be stripped (hear me, O gods!) of all
That now you have, and all that now you are,
And all you deem yourself, till naught is left;
Till you stand out a winter-blasted weed
In utter loneliness. May naught remain
Except confused regrets and memories wild,
And maddening thoughts of this your former life,
Which shall now beckon, now rebuff your mind,—
Shifting phantasmagoria weird and strange!
And when from out this awful chaos Death
Shall suddenly arise—the only form

Digitized by Google

Clearly defined—and shock your shrinking sight
With his cold visage and unmixed resolve,
Then may you feebly stretch your trembling hands
Towards virtue, as some comfort, if no shield,
And die at last in partial purity!

As MESSALINA *sinks upon a couch, covering her face with her hands, the scene closes.*

Digitized by Google

ACT II.

SCENE I.

An inner room in the apartment of MESSALINA, *luxuriously and wastefully furnished.* MESSALINA *alone, lewdly attired.*

Enter VALENS.

MESSALINA, *without turning.*

A step so light proves some one here who comes
For no good purpose; I am half inclined
To seek the shelter of another room,
Without once looking round.

VALENS.

By all the gods!
Do not do that!

MESSALINA.

Why? what has brought you here?

Digitized by Google

VALENS.

You know quite well.

MESSALINA.

No good motive, I fear,
Judging from your flushed cheeks and pouting lips
And half-drooped eyelids. Once again I ask,
What brings you here?

VALENS.

Pleasure.

MESSALINA.

And how do you know,
Why do you even think, that it is here?
You must have made some error.

VALENS.

Can I see
Pleasure before me, living, breathing, warm,
So potent, so condensed, so overcharged,

Digitized by Google

That my frame trembles, even at the sight,
And then not know her, though while I am speaking
I am convulsed with pain which yet is bliss?
Men may mistake their images for gods,
But hardly gods for images.

MESSALINA.

If I
Were not by nature so contained and cold,
Your words, which are but firebrands and coals
And bits of lighted tow—flung with a purpose—
Would have performed what you intend, and made
My blood take fire.

VALENS.

Since you are so cold
And uninflammable, it cannot do
The slightest harm for me to sit down, thus,
Quite close beside you, and try to find out,
Most gently, if you are not meltable.
Now I will put a kiss between each pair
Of your dear fingers,—so. They will stand guard,

Digitized by Google

And keep your hands quite still while a vast host
Of other kisses, their sworn comrades, mount
To win your lips, and then from there sweep down,
Marching and countermarching o'er your neck;
If you will only let them. Now, I see,
Your cheeks are growing scarlet, and your eyes
Begin to have a light which puts out mine;
And then, to tell the truth, your upper lip
Begins to swell—indeed, 'tis puffed already—
They say that is a sign which never fails.
Now, when upon that lip I have imprinted
A few long, clinging kisses——

MESSALINA.

Rising and pretending to shake herself free.

Stop, how dare you!
'Tis just three times that you have touched me: once
You kissed my hand, and once you jostled me,
In a thick crowd, and I did not exclaim;
And now you come unauthorized—and—and—
Why do you treat me so?

Digitized by Google

VALENS.

Because you are
Most beautiful. A beauty born to rouse
In human souls passion untamable,
And acting with that sure, resistless force
Of the great powers of Nature, as hot suns
Bring forth the leaves in Spring, or as the winds
Convulse the face of ocean.

MESSALINA.

Tell me, Vestius,
What would you have? would you prefer me coy,
Arch, winsome, timid, and yet almost bold,
Provoking dextrously your inclinations,
Fanning your fire with light, subtle strokes?
Or would you have me of a richer type,
Of temper more acknowledged, more robust,
A wilder, reckless passion?

VALENS.

I would have you
Exactly as you are to Silius.

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

Hold!
Breathe but his name again, we part forever,
And death shall follow you!

VALENS.

My Empress, pardon.

MESSALINA, *passionately.*

Tell me,—how would you have me?

VALENS.

As you are.

MESSALINA.

This, then, is as I am!
Throws herself into his arms.
Great Heaven! what's that?
'Tis steps—'tis he—hide, quick, or we are dead!
VALENS *hides himself behind the arras.*

Digitized by Google

SCENE II.

Enter SILIUS.

SILIUS.

Valeria, I have come.—Why, what's the matter?
Why are you dressed like this,—or undressed, rather?
Your face is half dissolved in pleasure, half
Stiffened with pain; your ears are scarlet, too,
And your cheeks white,—what is it?

MESSALINA.

I was ill
Before you left—I told you so—and still
I am oppressed by phantoms and strange fears.
I was just going to bed, hoping that there
I should forget them.

SILIUS.

What we spoke about
A little while ago inflamed my mind
To such a point I could not think of sleep.

Digitized by Google

I could not even quit the palace. But
I stayed where I could glance from time to time
Through the grand entrance, so as to be certain
If Claudius came here. Since you saw me leave
Your outer door, I have paced steadily,
Without once stopping, the long corridor,
And thinking, thinking till my brain became
Breathless and faint. I knew the time had come
To take a quick decision, yes, or no,
And then to act; and I am here to say
That I, at last, have quite made up my mind—
All doubt is over, action has arrived—
I am resolved to——

MESSALINA.

Stop! say nothing more.
Tell me some other time—not now!

SILIUS.

But why?
Do not you wish to hear?

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

No, wait!

SILIUS.

But why?

MESSALINA.

The time is not auspicious. I am sure
If you speak now you will regret it.

SILIUS.

Ah!

MESSALINA.

What makes you start so?

SILIUS.

I heard something move,
Or something breathe, I can't tell which. It seemed
To come from near that screen; I'll go and see.

MESSALINA.

Stand still, in heaven's name! Don't look behind it—
It is a deadly omen! If there were

Digitized by Google

Anything there, my own prophetic sense
Would tell me, and I then should say to you,
Go quick, at any risk!—Help, I am faint.

SILIUS.

Turning towards her.

What is it,—are you dizzy, darling?

VALENS *slips away.*

MESSALINA.

Oh!

A pause.

I feel a little better, love. Then was
Some dark prophetic entity, some thing
Of evil omen, creeping near our lives,
And threatening to invade their circle; for
I felt its icy breath,—but now 'tis gone,
And we can live and hope. What happiness,
To enter into life again! Come, love,
Sit close beside me, tell me everything.
What are your plans, what do you mean to do?

SILIUS.

Why are you grown so humble suddenly?
It is not like you; and above all now,

Digitized by Google

When my plans, as you call them, are but yours.
At any rate I have made up my mind
To act as you propose, and quickly too;
But we must take some order; it is folly
To leave so much to chance. Remember, though,
If ruin follow, as seems probable,
That the world's empire was far less my prize
Than you, Valeria. Now to business. Will
You give me leave to speak to Valens? He
Hinted at this affair not long ago,
But, as I had not your authority,
I put him off. Shall I make sure of him?

MESSALINA.

Who, Valens, did you say? Yes, I suppose so.

SILIUS.

How unstable you are, Valeria!
I know that you know Valens well, and now,
Upon some whim, some lethargy of mind,
You scarce recall him. If we mean to win
We must be practical about this matter.

Digitized by Google

We must have every detail of our scheme,
Mad though it may be, clearly understood,
And each agreed upon. Now to begin:
You know we cannot move a single step
With the Prætorian troops against us; but
If Geta, their commander, could be won!

MESSALINA.

You have some influence with him.

SILIUS.

I have,
And I will try my best to win him over.
I don't despair of him; but there is one
Stronger than Geta, one who, like the mole,
Working in dirt and darkness, raises all
The mountains of our cracking Roman world.
Petty court politics are now our world;
We call them mountains, they are mole-hills still.

MESSALINA.

Hush, not so loud. You mean Narcissus.

Digitized by Google

SILIUS.

Yes.

MESSALINA.

He is the power that moves the Emperor.

SILIUS.

We cannot do without him, possibly.
You know him best, and can approach him safest.
Choose your time well, and offer anything.
I need not school you in diplomacy,—
But stick at nothing, so that we may have him.
Will you accept the task?

MESSALINA.

I will. But hear me:
You say sometimes I am too silent, now
I long to speak to you. You told me, love,
In the same breath that you believed my plan
Was but another name for ruin. Yes,
You know you meant that; but in the same breath
You said that you adopted it, and there

Digitized by Google

You showed me virtues, vigors of the soul
Beyond my daily vision. Why, oh why
Is my sight so confined, so fixed upon
Life's foreground? But a change has come.
I feel that through the rite about to be
I am already wholly, proudly yours,—
Yours, and yours only.

SILIUS.

Why more fully mine
Now than before? My own dear love, you know
You were and are all mine, and I all yours.

MESSALINA.

It is the weakness of a woman's heart
To live through forms. I cannot alter it;
And since to women I must still be kin,
I am determined to surpass them all
In desperate earnestness. You see this vase!
It is a fitting type of my past life,—
Too rich in ornament, too poor in strength.
Dashes down the vase.

Digitized by Google

Where is it now? gone, and my past with it!
Shattered to fragments, quite forgotten, dead!
From this day forth, I swear to be to you
Your empress, leman, friend, companion, slave,
Aught, anything you will!—the lamp which burns
Only to light your way; the voice which sounds
Only to soothe your ear, the heart which beats
For you alone. Caius, receive my troth!

Kneels.

Take with it all I have, am, may become,
My fixed fidelity, my soul itself!

Digitized by Google

ACT III.

SCENE I.

An audience chamber in the palace.

CLAUDIUS *partially reclining.* MESSALINA, NARCISSUS, *and attendants grouped about him.*

CLAUDIUS.

This is an absurd story, by Augustus!
I can't imagine what gave rise to it—
This rumor which has spread abroad that I
Was spattered by the blood of a flamingo
At sacrifice. No evil omens come
Near me. My wife is far too fair for that;
Her beauty is a living augury,
A happy and a constant omen. No,
The gods were friendly to me from my birth;
For they resolved to give me the whole world
When I was nothing but a wretched outcast,

Digitized by Google

A wind-blown speck, the merest accident
Lost in Caligula's rough reign. And then,
Not satisfied, they added to the gift
The fairest woman in all Rome, the queen
Of love and pleasure; but, as I was saying,
It never came into my mind that I
Should be an emperor; but, for all that,
I have made a good one. Some have called me cruel,
And fond of blood. I wish I had them here!
I'd beat them, by Augustus, with thick chains!
Have they so soon forgotten my mild nephew,
Gentle Caligula? That was a reign!
Let them remember it, and then compare
His rule with mine, and they will have to own
That mine resembles Numa's reign beside it.
It is all gentleness and perfect peace.
Is that not true, Narcissus?

NARCISSUS.

Noble Cæsar,
It is quite true, but rather understated.
You are a bright example to be followed,

Digitized by Google

A living proof that Justice need not frown,
But may wear Mercy's smile. You are, in fact,
A monument of gentleness. You stand
Wrapt in that clemency which comes from strength.
But for the peace you spoke of, I must own
I do not see as much in your great reign
As your pure heart deserves; we do not have
All that we ought to have.

CLAUDIUS.

What is it you mean?

MESSALINA.

He merely means that the affairs of state,
Perpetual over-straining for your good,
Have vexed and wearied him.

NARCISSUS.

Cæsar, I mean
That rumors reach me of unsettlement
In many people's minds, who ought to be

Digitized by Google

Contented. It is whispered that there are
Glancing at MESSALINA.
Some who are great who would be greater still,
And even try——

CLAUDIUS.

You do not mean to say
That there is hidden danger?

NARCISSUS.

I can scarcely
Tell what to think.

MESSALINA, *significantly.*

Narcissus is a man
Of such pure heart and such devotion to
Our welfare, that if I could find some way
To still his mind's uneasiness, no matter
At what a cost, at what a sacrifice,
He might command me.

NARCISSUS.

I have but one love,
One reverence alone which equals that

Digitized by Google

I feel for Messalina. It may be
That I was over-anxious.

MESSALINA.

It is certain.

CLAUDIUS.

Come here, Valeria—there—no, closer still.
Takes her upon his knee.

Now give me that kiss you are mistress of.
She kisses him.
No woman in all Rome can kiss like that!
How did you ever learn it? By Augustus,
It makes me dizzy! You can make your lips
Cling as no other can, and, then, the instant
I take my lips away, you kiss me.—Ah!
The memory of it now makes me feel faint.
A pause.

I am inclined to give up the whole project,—
This trip to Ostia. Why should I go there?

Digitized by Google

I thought I took an interest in the matter,
That monstrous dike and harbor I am building;
But, after all, what is the use of it?
The sea some day will roll there unopposed,—
It will be all forgotten. I suppose
You could not leave Rome with me?

MESSALINA.

Cæsar, no.
That is beyond my power. I have now
A thousand things to keep me here. Each one
Taken alone is slight, but as a whole
They are despotic. I shall miss you greatly,—
You know how hard it is to let you go.
But then I love your fame as much as you;
You will return with all your plans perfected,
And the work well begun which is to be
Your greatest monument. 'Tis not the same
To leave such work to others,—this is yours,—
Yours and yours only; and when you return,
Proud of your triumph, I will be proud, too,
And come to welcome you.

Digitized by Google

CLAUDIUS.

I cannot tell.
What do you think, Narcissus?

NARCISSUS.

It was planned
That we should start at once; but suddenly
I thought I saw some reasons which should make us
Incline to stay. And yet I think some reasons,
Weightier, perhaps, should make us go. Indeed,
We ought to take some hours to think it over.

CLAUDIUS.

You are a living cunning! Luckily,
Most of it is in my behalf. But then
You know they do say that if you and Pallas
Would only take me into partnership,
The treasury would be full. There, do not look
So cheap and foolish; it is human nature—
A vile one. I believe that I will go
To Ostia; and a bright idea has struck me:
I mean to have a little sliding table
Rigged in my carriage; so that as we drive

Digitized by Google

We two can play, and so, with luck, perhaps
I may win back some tithe of what is mine.
I think to-morrow we might start; but now
My time has come for study,—I must go.

CLAUDIUS *rises to pass out.*

MESSALINA.

In an undertone to NARCISSUS, *as she passes him.*

Meet me to-night, at midnight, in the room
In front of my own chambers. I will see
That all the guards are absent.

NARCISSUS.

I will come.

Exeunt.

SCENE II.

An alcove of the temple of Mars.

Enter GETA, *meeting* PALLAS.

GETA.

Well met, Pallas, I'm glad to see you. Have
You seen Callistus?

Digitized by Google

PALLAS.

Yes, I saw him.

GETA.

Where?

PALLAS.

Quite near here. He'll be here in a moment.
He was pretending to be drunk, and making
As if he would go elsewhere, and slouched on
This way by simple chance.

GETA.

That was just like him!
He is too shrewd for us,—if you can call
Low cunning shrewdness. I have never seen
Any one man who would take so much trouble
To act out a deception, even where
The advantage is invisible! I tell you,
A man like that is hard to treat with; for
While your whole mind is bent on gaining over
A convert to your views, his mind is fixed
On gaining gain.

Digitized by Google

PALLAS.

He's brave, at any rate.

GETA.

He may be brave.

PALLAS.

I see you do not like him.

GETA.

Oh, yes, I like him well enough; but then
With such a man——

PALLAS.

Hush! he is coming in.

Enter CALLISTUS.

GETA.

Callistus, I am very glad to see you,—
Sincerely glad. It seems a proper time
For us, who are all members of one household,
To learn each other's views. Where is Halotus?

Digitized by Google

CALLISTUS.

We started out together, but of course
We separated. Still, he said at parting
He would be here before me. I suppose
He stopped for some strong wine; for he complained
That he felt faint, from tasting endless foods.

Enter HALOTUS.

HALOTUS.

I wish I had the man who first invented
This curse of food! I'd beat him long and lightly,
So as to hold the life in him until
He should feel himself die. My life has been
Poisoned with food! My health is wrecked. Besides,
I can't enjoy a single honest meal;
For everything I try to eat suggests
Some culinary horror.

GETA.

Well, have patience,
You may have vengeance yet. Friends, it would be
Folly for me to make a speech to you.

Digitized by Google

This meeting is entirely informal.
I only thought that if there should be trouble
(And it seems probable), by meeting here,
Quietly, in this way, we should be able
To act in concert. I feel for you all
A real affection, and my only wish
Is that we all may safely float together
Upon the next high tide. You know there are
Strange rumors, and strange thoughts and new ideas;
Confusion is beneath the court's smooth surface.
What will the issue be?

CALLISTUS.

To tell the truth,
I have not one idea about the matter.
My mind is vacant. You must tell me more
Before I can begin to think.

PALLAS.

What rumors
Are those you spoke of,—the new thoughts you said
Were gaining ground?

Digitized by Google

GETA.

Oh, nothing positive.
You know the Emperor at sacrifice
Was spattered with the blood of a flamingo.
Some say it means a change of sovereignty.

CALLISTUS.

But what do you say? We will trust to you.

GETA.

I am not skilled in omens. Come, Halotus,
You have not spoken yet, tell us, in terms
Which are not doubtful, what you mean to do
Amidst these changes.

HALOTUS.

I will tell you plainly.
I mean to wait, and wait until I know
Which side will win, and then to take that side,
And be well paid for my fidelity.

Digitized by Google

GETA.

That's it! They say that for all those who side
With the new party, there will be a rain
Of sesterces,—at least for those who hold
Their aprons out in time.

CALLISTUS.

But some contend
It will rain heads instead.

PALLAS, *to* CALLISTUS.

We shall arrive
At nothing in this way. Let us suppose
That there should be a struggle presently,
Between the party dominant at court
And a new party led by a great Roman,
A powerful patrician, on whose side
Would you be found?

CALLISTUS.

I cannot well believe
That there will be an actual convulsion,
A struggle for supreme control.

Digitized by Google

GETA.

They say
That Silius is the strongest man in Rome,
And growing stronger.

CALLISTUS.

Silius is strong.
But he is much too good a man to try
To wreck the State. Besides, since we are now
Upon that subject, I will tell you plainly
Silius has hurt himself by his good deeds
More than by all his bad ones. His new law
Against suborned informers and all those
False advocates who help the wrong for bribes,
And prostitute their talents, has but made him
A host of foes. He has a healthy mind
And healthy heart; and in a poisoned air,
Like this of Rome, such natures are the first
To be struck down. The only men who thrive
Are those who, like ourselves, are morally
A trifle tainted.

Digitized by Google

PALLAS.

It is time to go.
There must be some agreement. If the troubles
Which Geta fears should suddenly arise,
Shall we all stand together, and be found
On the same side?

CALLISTUS.

I hope so, I am sure;
In fact, I know so. I am confident
There is not one of us who will not try
To help the cause of right, stability,
And justice. You know Justice has one face,
And only one,—not two, like Janus. Yes,
I feel we four shall act as one.

GETA.

Callistus,
I thank you from my heart. Good-by!

CALLISTUS.

Good-by!

Digitized by Google

PALLAS, *in an undertone to* GETA.

When the strain comes, I'll pull with you.

GETA, *as they go out.*

The strain
Will come; it is beginning now.

CALLISTUS.

Who has pretended to go out in an opposite direction; but who has only hidden behind a column, dragging HALOTUS *after him.*

Halotus,
Do not be influenced by a single word
That man has spoken, or you will be lost.
It is just possible we may be able
To get an order from the Emperor
Putting a safe man in this Geta's place.
I am not sure,—if not, it means our ruin.

Exeunt.

Digitized by Google

SCENE III.

The Palatine hill. Midnight. The city visible below in the moonlight.

Enter SILIUS *alone; he pauses, and leans against the rampart.*

SILIUS.

So Geta promises that he will join us;
That gives our cause new strength. But, as he says,
This should have been determined long ago.
How have the days slipped by! Days? weeks and months,
All spent in pleasure, utterly consumed,
Which should have been devoted to the winning
Of the whole court,—canvassing every man,—
Making so sure that stepping on the throne
Would scarcely have produced a jar. But then
They were delicious days! O heaven, the scenes
That we have known! But they have left us here
With an uncertain fate. It is Valeria
Who keeps our future doubtful, and our lives
Forever in the balance; for her mind

Digitized by Google

Is woman's mind in its entirety.
She always thinks just what she wants to think.
She would enjoy the empire all at once
In her own way. She cannot bear to wait
To arrange each detail, and so to assure
Possession. She believes it is enough
That Claudius has a flaccid grasp of power,
To make it safe for us to disregard
All rules of prudence, and to suddenly
Seize the whole empire, as a fitting home
To love and revel in. It seems to her
That he must sink with his own weight; and, then,
That all men, seeing us upon the throne,
And that we grace our station, will agree
To do us homage. I am growing like her.
There's no escape from that, for she is mine,—
She loves me and has often proved it. I
Have grown to be a portion of her life.
I still have my own separate, stronger thoughts,
But they flit by me like some moving dream.
I feel my virtue slipping from my soul,
And yet I know not how, nor when, nor where,
As heat and cold and wet and dry depart

Digitized by Google

Before the ever-changing winds. 'Tis strange
That if she were of a chaste, even temper,
Serenely passionate, I should not need
To have her so forever in my thoughts.
But as it is, her life alone seems real.
I see the moving whirl of eager Rome;
The gatherings of men; the plots, the troubles
Which now surround us. I see our own peril,
And even the remedies. But it all seems
Something ill-timed, unnatural, out of place,
Not quite an ancient tale, yet more remote
Than Messalina's life,—my life with her,—
Where everything, from first to last, contains
A present reason and a living charm.

The world, made mystic, and so purified,
By the blue moonlight, stretches at my feet,—
For Rome is now the world. How beautiful
This glimmering scene of palaces and temples,
Pile upon pile, rising mysteriously
From the black shadows! This whole sleeping world
Is waiting for a ruler. Antony
Lost this same world for one weak woman's love,—

Digitized by Google

And Silius,—no, that is not history yet.
The chances are still strongly on our side.
In fact, they never were so strong; for now
Geta has given his promise, and with him
And the Prætorians, we can hardly fail.
A something tells me we are sure to win,—
Hail to the omen!—and to prove it true
I will awake, and put forth every power
To win, not lose, the whole world for a woman!

Exit.

Enter NARCISSUS, *moving stealthily along the parapet.*

NARCISSUS.

I wish I knew what Silius was saying.
He thought himself alone, and so spoke out,—
At least I think so, for I could not hear
Another voice with his. I almost caught
The words. At any rate, I saw his face,
And its expression said as plain as words
That something desperate is afoot. I fear
This Silius; he has too much on his side.
It is just possible he may be able

Digitized by Google

To overwhelm us all in general ruin.
I have one great advantage, though: this crisis
For me is furnished with a double exit
On the safe side; for I can try to win
By hurling down, or holding up, the State.
To-night decides which effort it shall be.
It is a desperate venture! for things desperate
Are not the times of strife and clashing swords,
But of suspense between alternatives;
Those quiet, anxious moments whose decision
Directs the swords, and tells them where to plunge.
Why do I stand and reason with myself,
And loiter, and delay, and try to hope
That somehow, all at once it will grow easier
To face this interview? I have so longed
For such a chance, even when it seemed beyond
The range of possibility; and now—
I shall be braver when the moment comes—
But now my nerves are utterly unstrung.

Exit.

Digitized by Google

SCENE IV.

The outer room of the apartment of MESSALINA. MESSALINA *reclining upon a couch of skins, and lost in thought.*

NARCISSUS *enters stealthily.*

MESSALINA.

What is the night, Narcissus?

NARCISSUS.

It is clear.
The moon is shining on the sleeping city,
Which *looks* most peaceful. You, perhaps, can tell
Whether it is so; for, as empress, you
Have the best means of knowing.

MESSALINA.

As you came,
Did you meet any one upon the way?

NARCISSUS.

I thought I saw—I may have been mistaken—
Our consul just elected.

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

Silius? Where?

NARCISSUS.

Not far from here upon the Palatine.
I gathered from a look I seemed to see
Upon his face, that he was meditating
Some great move in life's game. And then it came
Into my mind that I, perhaps, was summoned
In this connection, for some information,
Or some slight aid I might be able to give
To a great undertaking, and, of course,
A good one.

MESSALINA.

You are wrong, as often happens
With minds too keen. For, as for Silius,
I think he is too much in love with me
(If you will pardon me) to do or think
A single thing which does not bear upon
The keeping and increasing my affection.

NARCISSUS.

Then why have I been summoned?

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

I cannot
Admit I summoned you; or if I did,
It was because I've noticed for some time
A something in your manner and your look,
Which seemed to say that you were on the watch,
Waiting and hoping for a chance to speak.

NARCISSUS.

Well, if I was not summoned, I suppose
I may as well depart. Good-night, my Empress.

MESSALINA, *agitated.*

Since you are here, I think it would be best
To stay a moment. You know, for myself,—
Myself alone,—that I am fond of power,
And apt to long, in a vague, aimless way,
For what I have not, and it might occur
That you could aid me.

NARCISSUS.

This is waste of time!—
Time which is precious. We shall never gain
One inch of ground by sparring,—it is hopeless,—

Digitized by Google

We are too closely matched. You see me here
Firmly convinced that you have need of me
For some great purpose,—what, I do not know,
And do not wish to know; but I am ready
To give my fullest aid.

MESSALINA.

On what conditions?

NARCISSUS.

I was the first to take the risk, and lay
My thoughts before you; now, it seems that you,
As being the stronger, should first state to me
Your portion of the terms.

MESSALINA.

The terms are these:
You must remain in utter ignorance
Whether I have a plan, or not; and I—
Should a design to gain more power exist—
Would give my word to tell you all in time
For you to act with vigor and success.
But you must swear to give your utmost aid,
No matter what I may demand.

Digitized by Google

NARCISSUS.

These terms
Are very hard,—harder than I expected.
And yet I think I could accept them—if—
What shall be my reward?

MESSALINA.

More power, by far,
More wealth than you have now, a thousand times.

NARCISSUS.

These are great things; but I have more of both
Than I deserve. I do not long for more.

MESSALINA.

Have you no overpowering wish, then?

NARCISSUS.

Yes.

MESSALINA.

What is it? Speak!

Digitized by Google

NARCISSUS.

I dare not.

MESSALINA.

Do not fear
To name your wish, and state your own conditions,
Just as I stated mine.

NARCISSUS.

If I could hope
That I am not now so repulsive to you
As I once was——

MESSALINA.

I do not understand.

NARCISSUS.

Have I your promise that in no event—
No matter what I wish, or hope, or ask—
You will be scornful, or will feel resentment,
And follow me with hatred?

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

Yes, I promise.

NARCISSUS.

Then let me say at once that I believe
That all that you desire might be placed
Within your reach.

MESSALINA, *aside.*

Awful temptation! How?

NARCISSUS.

It is the telling how demands your promise.

MESSALINA.

You have it,—speak!

NARCISSUS.

You know I love you—yes,
You know it perfectly.—Give me the tithe
Of the love which you waste on those who are
Beneath your very notice! I adore you!

Digitized by Google

Give me yourself, just as you are,—all stained,
Soiled by the world, and yet sublime in beauty!
And I will make your will the supreme law
Of all the world. Why are you silent?

MESSALINA.

Oh,
This situation is an agony!
I see success within my easy reach,—
I may have all I wish for, and long years
To fill with it,—love, pleasure, power,—and yet
In payment, I must make myself unfit
To enjoy one hour.

NARCISSUS.

You cannot pretend
That you despise me so, since you could stoop
Even down to Mnester, that low-born comedian.

MESSALINA.

For once, your wit has failed you; to accuse
A woman is the best means that I know
To make her prove herself quite chaste to you.

Digitized by Google

Your charge is mean and false! Let us break off
This interview at once. You have my answer,—
I dare you do your worst!

NARCISSUS.

My worst might be
A little troublesome,—a trifle dangerous;
For instance, I might choose to make a hole
In the court screens,—a little one, you know,—
Just big enough to let a ray of daylight
Fall on the death of Appius Silanus.

MESSALINA.

You might as well attempt to tame a lion
With a light switch, as to tame me by *fear*.
I dare you do your worst!

NARCISSUS.

Hear me, Valeria!
I love you so that I could never harm you;
I would not injure you by word or deed.
Love me a little, even with contempt,—

Digitized by Google

Give me the waste, the skimmings of your love,—
And I will pledge my life that I will carry
Not only you, but those you hold most dear
Up to the very highest pitch of power.
You hesitate,—O Heaven! that means consent!
I see you yield, I feel that you are mine!
I would die beaten into shreds with chains
For this one moment! Oh, at last!

He embraces her.

MESSALINA.

Away!
Oh, let me go! You're killing me with shame!

Shaking herself free.

Your slavish touch has coursed through my whole frame
With a long thrill of horror.—I am changed!
The blood of all the Cæsars in my veins
Boils up, and tells me how I have betrayed
The life that I was born to, and have stooped
To herd with things even as base as you,—
But I can rise, and that you never can.—
Back to the lower regions of the world,

Digitized by Google

The life where you belong, the slums, the purlieus!
This is a purer air than you can breathe,
And it is poison to you!

NARCISSUS.

Hear me, though!
Listen this once! Listen,—it is too late,—
You are pledged to me, and cannot now draw back.

He attempts to embrace her again, following her as she retreats before him.

MESSALINA, *drawing a dagger.*

A scratch from this is death,—and if you touch me,
I shall strike quick and deep. For here I stake
My soul's new purity against your life!
Away! your life's in danger!

Exit NARCISSUS.

She lets fall her dagger, and sinks upon the couch.

Oh, my love!
I fear that this, my first fidelity,
Will cost us more than all my former treasons.

Digitized by Google

ACT IV.

SCENE I.

The road to Ostia.

Enter CLAUDIUS *in a chariot, playing at dice with* NARCISSUS; *and accompanied by* PALLAS *and a numerous retinue.*

CLAUDIUS.

Stop the coach here! this scenery is attractive.
I will get out and stretch myself. Besides,
I've won enough,—enough, at any rate,
To keep you busy digging, for a while,
Into the treasury, before you can
Repay it.

Descends, with NARCISSUS *and* PALLAS, *from the coach, which drives on slowly.*

NARCISSUS.

Cæsar, you have wondrous luck!
It never fails. You hold it from the gods.

Digitized by Google

CLAUDIUS.

I know you think I cheat; but I do not.
Yet if I did, it would be only fair
To make you give a little something back
Out of the enormous sums you take from me.
Yours is a bigger game than mine. It is
More risky, too. Your dice are human lives,
And the stake Rome.—Well, it amounts to that.
Cheating, you know, is the life of your game;
And you play fairly well. But, then, some day
You'll lose a throw,—one throw would, in your case,
Be quite sufficient,—and the forfeit is
Proportioned to the greatness of the game.

Enter a messenger. NARCISSUS *and the messenger whisper apart.*

CLAUDIUS *turns to* PALLAS.

I'm hungry, Pallas; so I hope you have
A good full banquet ready. Where's the place?

PALLAS.

I ordered all prepared that I could think of,
And the meal spread beneath a clump of elms

Digitized by Google

Upon the road-side, half a mile from here.
I did not know that you would leave your carriage.

CLAUDIUS.

That can be managed.

Turning to NARCISSUS.

Well, what does he say?

NARCISSUS.

Cæsar, the messenger has little news.

CLAUDIUS.

I asked you what he said.

NARCISSUS.

'Twas chiefly this,
That Lucius Pollio died last night near Rome.
He died in his own bath, under the care
Of a physician.

CLAUDIUS.

Then, that means that you
Caused this man's death. And why? What harm had he
Committed against you?

Digitized by Google

NARCISSUS.

No harm to me,
But harm against the State. I feared the man;
For though he had done nothing overt yet,
He had a reckless and unsettled mind.
His friends were so debauched, and all his courses
So wild, and even impious, that we all
Thought him a dangerous man.

CLAUDIUS.

And do you call
This news of slight importance, that in Rome,
Here in my home, in my own capital,
Under my very eyes, a Roman noble,
A man of consular degree and rank,
Is killed without my orders? Do you mean
To make my city, my imperial Rome,
A dark and foul and dingy cell, where death
Creeps none know whither? Where gray, grisly forms,
Monsters of ruin, dimly crawl about
As you direct them?

Digitized by Google

NARCISSUS, *kneeling.*

Mercy, Cæsar, mercy!
Spare those who acted from the noblest wish,—
The wish to strengthen your great, glorious house,
And to preserve your god-like self, that staff
On which we all must lean.

CLAUDIUS.

To one who looks
Upon this matter with the quick hot glance
Belonging to a natural man,—a man
Untutored and untrained, and much impressed
By first appearances,—this murderous deed
Seems horrible; but to philosophy

NARCISSUS *sighs and rises.*

It is not so. For when a man is dead,
Philosophy, deny her as we may,
Will whisper he deserved it. As for him,
This Pollio, I cannot regret him much.
It is one man the less, at any rate;
That is a comfort.

Now, in your own case,
Let us suppose that I had condemned you

Digitized by Google

To the same fate,—now looking at it fairly,—
Would you not have to own that you deserved it,
That the idea was happy? As for me,
I know I merit death—well, every day;
But there are forms which, rising out of life,—
Expressing by their beauty all its dreams
Scattered through centuries,—were not intended
To fade away and die. Valeria, now,
Was never meant to die, and leave the world
Without one model, concentrate and full,
Of woman's charm. I think I will return.
She has a witchery beyond all thought,
And then such glorious limbs! It is a waste
Of our one single life, this making harbors
And building dikes, with Messalina near,
In easy reach. I feel the need of her,—
I will go back.

NARCISSUS.

Cæsar, I beg of you
That, as you value your own peace and safety,
You will continue on your way to Ostia!
I cannot tell you what is happening yet,—

Digitized by Google

I do not know precisely,—but from spies
I learn that Rome is on the very verge
Of outbreak. There's a plot,—'tis in the air,—
It will burst forth.—But from this vantage-ground
You cannot fail to master it; and then
You will return in triumph.

CLAUDIUS.

If there is
The slightest danger in returning now,
I would not think of it. Let us go on.
I wish you had not told me there was danger,—
You have half spoiled my hunger. Tell them there
To bring me a led horse. At any rate,
I'll try the quality of Pallas' banquet.

Exit, with his soldiers and attendants.

NARCISSUS, *shaking his hand towards Rome.*

Lady, take care! The empire is here!
I have it with me, and shall keep it, too;
It may return and crush you. Ah, take care!

Exit.

Digitized by Google

SCENE II.

The gardens of LUCULLUS.

At the back of the scene MESSALINA *has caused an archway to be constructed, so contrived that no one can look behind it, and that from the front it gives the impression of looking through it upon the sea-beach and the ocean beyond. Sea-nymphs are clustered here in waiting.*

Near the centre of the scene there is an altar with a fire burning upon it. An Augur, in his priestly robes, is standing beside the altar. On the right, a portion of the massive wall surrounding the gardens is visible. Rude steps of hewn stone make it possible to scale the wall, and look out over the city. On the left there is a fountain. In the foreground are statues and flowering plants.

SILIUS *enters, in the character of Mars, followed by a few unarmed friends and attendants. His helmet, sword, and spear are carried behind him by slaves.*

Digitized by Google

Immediately after his entrance, MESSALINA *rises from the sea, as Venus Aphrodite. As she steps on shore, her attendant nymphs fling some light draperies about her, leaving her person still partially disclosed.*

SILIUS *meets* MESSALINA, *and leads her before the Augur, who bows low as they approach.*

Chorus of Nymphs.

Rejoice, rejoice, the age of woe
Is past; hail, happy reign!
No blood forever more shall flow,
Save holy victims slain.

With pinions flashing from on high,
The gods their heralds send;
They come to dry man's weeping eye,
His wandering steps to mend.

O'er all the world they swiftly dart,
And every throb of pain,
Each thought of sadness, every smart,
Each pleasure's sullen stain,

Digitized by Google

They gather quickly in a flock,
And drive them on before,
These evermore from light to lock
On Pluto's twilight shore.

Hail, happy reign! Hail, blessed pair!
Late, late may ye return
To where forever, high in air,
Your mingled light shall burn!

Chorus of Male Attendants.

Pleasure of beauty,
Pleasure of strength,
Now for the first time
Wedded at length;
Passion of giving,—
Burning and living,—
Passion of taking,
Longing yet quaking;
Power of thirsting,
Love's shackles bursting,
Power of slaking
From the waves waking,
Hail to ye! hail to ye!
Life has no veil to ye—

Digitized by Google

In your embraces
The lives of all races
Exhale!
Hail to ye! hail to ye!
Nations shall quail to ye!
Hail!

Both together.

I.

Hark to the whisper far o'er the sea!
Murmurs of distance, echoes of glee,
Hearts that have eagerly waited to see
Gladness and peace by this moment set free.

II.

The wild beauty, passion, power,
Of this mystic nuptial hour,
Speeding on from clime to clime,
Through the realms of future time,
Shall make many a pulse to thrill,
Many a human eye to fill,
Even as long as man shall be
Subject to Love's mastery.

Digitized by Google

III.

Hail to ye! hail to ye!
Joy never fail to ye!
Find in the hearts of your people your home,
Hail to ye! hail to ye!
Nations shall quail to ye!
Hail to ye, noble possessors of Rome!

SILIUS, *to the Augur, who has gazed steadfastly up at the sky, and shuddered.*

What made you start?

AUGUR.

I saw a flock of birds.

SILIUS.

How did they fly, towards the right, or left?

AUGUR.

I cannot tell. I may have been mistaken.
My eyes are not as young as they once were,
Nor are my nerves.—I think I was deceived;

Digitized by Google

But somehow these wild marsh birds flitting by
Gave me a shock. Let us proceed at once.

SILIUS.

I know you were deceived; not by your age,
But by your love for us, which makes you anxious,
Painfully on the watch, and overstrained,
Fearful of some mischance. We will proceed.
The private contract has been signed, and all
The strict formalities have been complied with.
It now remains to read the sanctioning act
Of Claudius Drusus, and to ask the gods
To bless and guard this union; then we shall
Consult the auspices with sacrifice.
Is all prepared for sacrifice?

AUGUR.

It is.

SILIUS, *to* MESSALINA.

Have you the document, Valeria?

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

Yes.

She hands the parchment to SILIUS, *who gives it to the Augur.*

AUGUR, *reading.*

Be it known that I, CLAUDIUS CÆSAR, *being High Priest of Rome, as well as Emperor, do hereby, from this day forth, renounce and utterly annul my marriage with the Empress,* VALERIA MESSALINA, *in order to avert an omen of the gods, which foretells danger to her husband; and I hereby bestow her hand in marriage upon* CAIUS SILIUS, *the consul elect, calling upon all men to do her honor, as great as heretofore, and to acknowledge him as her only true and lawful husband.*

Signed by my own hand this third day of the Kalends of October, in the eight hundred and first year of the City.

TIBERIUS CLAUDIUS DRUSUS CÆSAR.

Digitized by Google

SILIUS.

This shall be cut on plates of brass, and hung
In public places. It is tantamount
To an act of abdication. That is plain.
There is no room for doubt. All men can see
That we have had the empire thrust upon us.
Turning to MESSALINA *and kneeling.*
And therefore I salute you first, Valeria,
Mistress of Rome, and doubly Empress now!

MESSALINA.

I hail you Cæsar!—husband, lover, friend,
Master of me and of my empire!

ALL.

Hail!

SILIUS.

And now, most noble Augur, we beseech you
To sacrifice to the immortal gods;

Digitized by Google

And, having looked upon the sacred victim,
To give us happy omens for our union.

The Augur retires behind the altar.

The full Chorus, chanting slowly, a mezza voce.

O sacred gods, look down
From heaven with gentle eyes!
And here with happy omens crown
This heartfelt sacrifice.

Oh, answer tenderly
The prayers we send above,
That all mankind may joy to see
The power of perfect love.

Bless these loved ones of Time
In their completest hour;
Oh, shed your lasting peace sublime
On this new birth of power!

The Augur reappears, greatly agitated.

Great Silius, or Cæsar, I should say,
The omens are not what I had expected.
They have appalled—I mean that the aspects

Digitized by Google

Are not like any I have ever seen.
It may be that some slave has touched the victim,
Or some impurity, or some mistake
May have produced it. I will try again.

A sound is heard on the right, as of distant confusion in the city.

SILIUS.

What is that noise?

MESSALINA.

'Tis nothing of importance,
Only some revellers. Let us go on,
And then the moment that the Augur gains
The omens we desire, we can go
And dance and feast. I will transform these nymphs
Into Bacchantes, laughing, supple things,
With flowing hair and vines and scanty garments,
And you can deck——

SILIUS.

I do not like that noise;
There is commotion in it.

Digitized by Google

To an attendant.

Mount the wall,
And tell us what you see and hear from there.

Attendant scales the wall.

MESSALINA.

Well, what is it?

ATTENDANT, *from the wall.*

I see a dreadful storm
Gathering at Ostia!

A faint rumble of thunder is heard.

There is fighting, too,—
I know there is—but it is hidden—it is
Behind the houses——

The sounds of violence grow louder.

It is coming nearer—
They are killing—— Save yourselves! fly for your lives!
The soldiers are upon us!

The Augur slips away. The attendants scatter in different directions.

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

I must go.

SILIUS.

And leave me here to perish?

MESSALINA.

There is still
A single chance for us to save ourselves,
And then begin again to love and live.
One hope alone—I *must* go! I must fly
To Claudius! If I can succeed—If I
Can once get near him—You know what a power
My will has over his. Besides, the sight
Of me will make my influence——

SILIUS.

You are
My wife, and I would rather suffer death
Than see you taken back by Claudius;
Winning his mercy by your amorous wiles,
Making your charms my ransom. But, besides,

Digitized by Google

The plan is hopeless. Let us make great speed,
And fly at once to the Prætorian camp.
Geta is for us—he is ready now—
There we will offer all that they can wish,
Make a harangue, declare a regency—
The game is ours if we have nerve to win it.

VALENS *staggers in mortally wounded. He sways about and sinks to the ground.*

SILIUS, *supporting* VALENS'S *head.*

Call a physician! The poor boy must not die—
He's faint from loss of blood—he may be saved.

VALENS.

No, let me be—the cut is deep—I'm dying—
They stabbed me near the gate. Geta's displaced—
All's lost.

MESSALINA.

Silius, I know there is one chance;
I feel that I can save you!

She disappears.

Digitized by Google

VALENS, *trying to stretch out his arm towards her.*

Do not go—
I have crawled here—only to see your face
Once—once——

Dies.

SILIUS.

What, did you dare to love her, too?

Shrinks away from the body.

Your pallid face of death demands my pardon;
But it is hard to grant it to you.

Enter a centurion.

CENTURION.

Come!

SILIUS.

The slaves have fled, and borne away the weapons
Which I brought here in sport,—but if I had them,
I'd show you desperate earnest.

CENTURION.

It would be
But courage wasted. I am one of many—

Digitized by Google

Soldiers enter.

You see them here. Once more I tell you, come!

SILIUS.

Whither?

CENTURION.

To your own house. My orders are
To keep you there until the Emperor
Returns from Ostia, and makes known his wishes.

SILIUS.

I meant to use my victory for good,
And so I have some little foothold left—
Something to rest upon. I meant to win
Freedom for Rome and for myself—and now—
Now that my youth and life are leaving me—
I still can bear it as it is; for death
Is but a sterner name for liberty.

Exit, guarded.

Digitized by Google

SCENE III.

The Ostian way, near Rome.

The city is visible in the distance. In the foreground, on the right, is a small inn. CLAUDIUS *appears in his carriage;* NARCISSUS *is seated beside him;* CALLISTUS *is driving, and* HALOTUS *is in front with* CALLISTUS.

CLAUDIUS.

Let us stop here a moment; from this hill
We can see Rome. Tell me, can you descry
Any rebellious troops, or any horsemen
Coming this way? If you see any—why—
I think I shall give orders to turn round,
And drive full speed towards Ostia.

NARCISSUS.

Cæsar, listen,
I beg of you, implore you, only hear
What I am saying! for your powerful mind
Can grasp the whole affair if you will hear me.
I say the worst is over, you are saved.

Digitized by Google

CLAUDIUS.

Narcissus, tell me truly, am I still
The Emperor? Does Silius still remain
A private citizen?

NARCISSUS.

Take courage, Cæsar!
You only have to show yourself in Rome
To splendidly complete the victory
Which we have well begun; for Silius
Is now a prisoner, and the cause of all,
The Empress—the late Empress, I should say—
Has fled from your just anger. No one knows
Where she is hiding, but it makes no matter,
You are again supreme. Let us push on
To Rome.

CALLISTUS.

Cæsar, that was your master-stroke,
That move of taking the command away
From Geta, and bestowing it upon
Narcissus.

NARCISSUS.

Yes, that is the only thing
That saved us. Through my proxy I was able

Digitized by Google

To capture some, and kill some more; but now
I ought to be in Rome to take command.
Drive on, Callistus.

CLAUDIUS.

Stop a moment, first!
Halotus, go and bring me from the inn
Some wine. Oh, good or bad—unwatered, and
The strongest there. I feel a little faint.
I'm very tired.

CALLISTUS, *to* NARCISSUS.

Your last messenger
Gave us no news of Messalina, though
I questioned him most carefully. I wish
We knew about her. She may be at sea,—
Though that seems hardly probable,—or else,
She may be in the country with her slaves.
Have you the least idea where she lies hidden?

NARCISSUS.

Deep in the purlieus, I suppose. She has
Some queer friends who know sequestered places.
We shall not see her till we drag her out.

Digitized by Google

CLAUDIUS, *who has taken the wine.*

The wine has done me good. Now I am ready.

Enter MESSALINA.

CALLISTUS.

We are all lost!

NARCISSUS.

Dash on, drive over her!

CLAUDIUS.

Stop! I am Cæsar! Harm her, and you die!
She is my wife, and I will hear her speak,
Though it should cost me Rome!

MESSALINA.

Cæsar, I come,
Not as a frightened, guilty suppliant,
With wild heroics and vain cries for mercy,
But simply as your wife, your true wife still—
Erring and faulty (you of your great goodness
Can pardon that)—but here I swear to you

Digitized by Google

I never meant you harm, and in this matter
I am not guilty of a single deed
Which you could call a crime. The marriage act
You signed yourself. 'Twas simply to avert
An evil omen; and when all the rites
Had been performed, I thought that Silius,
Who was and is your friend—Give me some wine!
I'm dizzy! *They hesitate.*

CLAUDIUS.

You must see that she is faint—
Give her the wine! *She drinks.*

MESSALINA.

I thought that Silius
Might be made useful to you, by my giving
To him just power enough to take from you,
Only the baser part, the petty care,
The thankless burden of the empire.

CLAUDIUS.

Yes,
It is a burden.

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

I intended solely
To make him the enforcer of your will,
That you might rule through him, and he might be
A constant comfort to you and a shield
To guard you from the shocks, the anxieties,
The ceaseless dread you dwell in from the plots
Of just such slaves as these.

NARCISSUS.

Immortal Cæsar!
I beg, beseech you, by the immortal gods,
Your friends and fellows, place no trust in her!
She is a living menace to you; for
She meant to overthrow you utterly,
And make her paramour the Emperor.
She still has many partisans. Who knows?
Some may be hiding near us. Hear me, Cæsar,
Or we are lost! Oh, hasten on to Rome,
And leave her here to meet her punishment!

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

Do not believe this man—he is the creature
Of a court faction which, if it succeeds,
Will compass your destruction, and will shock
The whole world by its deeds of violence.
He is as true a seed of blood and ruin
As ever grew in Rome.

CLAUDIUS, *pointing to* NARCISSUS.

I cannot think
That one I know so well can be as bad
As you would have me think; but then, again,
The same most probably applies to you:
You may not be, perhaps, so innocent
As you would prove yourself; but still I feel
That I have judged you harshly.

MESSALINA.

Oh, indeed
You have! But my whole heart is overflowing
With love and gratitude, now that I see
That you can pity me.

Digitized by Google

NARCISSUS.

To MESSALINA, *getting between her and the Emperor, and speaking rapidly.*

Hush! Listen,—quick!
If you will trample all your scorn in the dust,
Recant, renounce the past, divide from Silius,—
If you will love me, in a single word,—
I think I still can save you.

MESSALINA.

Never! For
The more I fall, the more I see how deep
You lie below me—scarcely visible—
A spot, a stain!

CLAUDIUS.

What is the Empress saying?

NARCISSUS, *springing to* CLAUDIUS'S *side.*

She offers me her love, if I will stab you!

Digitized by Google

CLAUDIUS.

Drive on to Rome, or we are lost! You wretch!
And when I tried so hard to save you, too!
May the gods bring about your speedy ruin!

They drive away, followed by a few straggling attendants.

MESSALINA.

Oh, I am doomed! Stop, Cæsar, stop, turn back!
It is a lie! What, are they gone,—all gone—
Not one remaining? No, it cannot be!

Looks around wildly.

Yes, yes, it is—there is a viewless gulf
Between me and mankind. Will no one cross?
Not one, of all who said they worshipped me!
The rapid tide of empire and of love,
Wealth, honor, happiness, hope, passion, life,
Has ebbed away, and left me stranded here.
Oh, would to heaven, Silius, that I
Had yielded to your wisdom! It is now
Too late. Too late! Oh, what a dreadful word!

More wildly.

Digitized by Google

Does my mind wander? What is this I feel?
Alone—and yet I am no more alone!
The powers of Hades gather round my soul—
I feel their influence. Can this be death,
Or is it prophecy? I gaze far down
Into the inmost depths of Hell. From there
The lurid flames of Phlegethon shoot up,
And boil around my spirit. In the glare
I see the future. Cæsar, 'tis your turn—
Do not you taste the poison in your cup?
And you, Narcissus, does your heart enjoy
The pressure of your dagger's point,—I see
They meet? And Agrippina, too! In vain
You struggle, madam, you are choking. Oh!
No, not Britannicus,—no, not my child!

Reels dizzily and falls.

Digitized by Google

ACT V.

SCENE I.

SILIUS'S *house.*

SILIUS, *alone, in a dejected attitude.*

This neutral time, which is not life or death,
Is even worse than death. It is a dull,
Persistent, growing anguish. It is as if
Some corpse cast up upon the shore and left
To rot there, could behold the world around,
And hear the children's voices singing near,
And women crooning while they mend the nets,
And feel the winds and waves, and watch the gulls,
And feel the heels of the rough fishermen
Trample its bones. My mind and nerves and strength
Tremble beneath this strain—this horrid sense
Of being in a world that is not mine—
Living yet dead. If anything could try

Digitized by Google

The courage, it is this! If I could act!
If I could only get a sword, and die
Cutting them down before me! I might fly—
This house is not especially well guarded—
I think it might be possible. But whither?
There is no place to fly to—all the world
Belongs to Rome, and Rome belongs to those
Who pull the puppet Claudius—that confused
Assemblage of outworn and damaged thoughts,
That living yesterday. Even years ago
No one could fly—look at the fate of Pompey—
The moment that he landed, though it was
Far off in Africa, he met his death.

Enter CLAUDIUS, *disguised as a centurion and followed by a number of soldiers.*

I know your business. I am ready.

CLAUDIUS.

No,
You cannot know it, for we hardly know it
Ourselves. That is, I mean, the Emperor
Has sent us here to say—what was it that
He sent us here to say? Oh, yes, I have it.

Digitized by Google

He says your life is justly forfeited
Through your attempt against himself, he being
Your ruler, and besides your friend. It was
An ugly business, Silius. I will wager
That Cæsar would have given you anything,
Honor and power and gold; and shut his eyes
Even to your failings, if you had been open
And fair with him, and asked him honestly
For what you wished, and had not cruelly
Plotted against him in the dark, and tried
To ruin an old friend, and take away
His empire and his life.

SILIUS.

I never tried
To take away his life, and never meant to.

CLAUDIUS.

What, then you had some feeling for him still?
You had not quite forgotten the old kindness.
I'm glad to know that much; but tell me, Silius,

Digitized by Google

What are your feelings now towards Claudius Cæsar,
What do you think of him?

SILIUS.

'Tis not for you,
In your inferior station, to inquire
What I may think; but yet I mean to tell you.
It cannot make much difference now to me—
My time is short. He is a man who has
More mind than will, by far, and much more will
Than courage; for he makes himself appear
Even weaker, and much duller than he is,
To placate opposition. He is ruled
By those who have no breadth of mind, no learning,
Nothing but will—creatures whom he despises.
If mind were master in this world of ours,
He would be potent; but as character
Is the chief force, he is—well all men know
Just what he is—and yet I always liked him.
He has a certain charm. But I forget,
My voice is out of place among the living,
It sounds unmeaning.

Digitized by Google

CLAUDIUS.

You have given me
A better character than I had hoped for,
Considering how we stand towards each other.
He removes his helmet.

SILIUS.

Cæsar!

CLAUDIUS.

Yes, I have come to ask of you
What you desire or hope for.

SILIUS.

Instant death—
I ask you nothing more—I've played my game,
And lost, and I will pay.

CLAUDIUS.

I must admit
That you deserve to die; but so do many
Who are less interesting, and yet live on.
But tell me, what did you intend to do?

Digitized by Google

SILIUS.

To administer the State with some attempt
At justice mixed with freedom.

CLAUDIUS.

Why, that is
The very thing I have been trying to do,
And found it an ungrateful task. I tell you,
You would have found the weight unbearable.
But that is not the point I wish to know,—
Tell me the whole truth—what did you intend
To do with me? For they do say, you know,
You meant to murder me.

SILIUS.

It is a lie!
You know me well—I shall make no defence
Except to say it is a falsehood.

CLAUDIUS.

Well,
I had some doubts, and so I came myself—
Well guarded, as you see. They all opposed me;

Digitized by Google

But then Narcissus was away, and so
I managed it. But tell me one thing fully,
What did you mean for me?

SILIUS.

Cæsar, you are
An author above all things, and a man
Possessing the rare gift of knowing books
As friends and comrades, not mere bits of paper.
I meant to give you time, and boundless means
And opportunity to carry forward
Your great works to completion, and to leave
A lasting name behind you.

CLAUDIUS.

Why, that is
Precisely what I should have wished myself.
I find you as intelligent as ever.
How have we revelled in old wine together,
And youthful maidens, and the Grecian classics,—
The only things at once both old and young!
I feel that I have done some wrong to you,
And to—to *her*.

Digitized by Google

Enter NARCISSUS *followed by* PALLAS; *the former with difficulty controlling his agitation.*

Narcissus, here, *taking him aside.*
I find
Silius has been maligned in this sad business.
He is the same good fellow as before.
I cannot help believing it would be
A good idea to ask him round to supper.
What do you think?

NARCISSUS.

I think that if you do,
The scene within an hour will be like this:
Your royal room in horrid disarray,
The arras torn, the table-service scattered,
Lamps overturned, dishes and vases broken,
And you yourself beneath this mass, quite dead,
Your own blood and your own wine running mingled.
It is a horrid thought. I tell you, Cæsar,
That man is gazing on you now as prey,
Prey for the knife. Your life hangs by a hair!
It is not worth a single moment's purchase

Digitized by Google

While he still lives. Save yourself! Order him
To instant execution.

CLAUDIUS *lets his head fall upon his breast, and gazes upon the ground, lost in doubtful revery.*

Cæsar nods!
That nod which is like Jupiter's, and carries
All things before it. Hale that man away!
Cæsar commands that he be taken hence.

In a lower voice.

Put him to death at once. I will go with you.

Exit NARCISSUS, *with* SILIUS *guarded.*

CLAUDIUS, *rousing himself from his revery.*

Yes, those were pleasant times. I do not think
That I have ever known more happy hours
Than those we spent in chat and revelry.
But they are gone, and like most things once past
They are unwilling to come back again.
Pallas, I must have wine. I feel depressed.
Can you prepare to-day, at this short notice,
A banquet delicate in its details
And monstrous in proportions?

Digitized by Google

PALLAS.

Cæsar, yes,
I know I can.

CLAUDIUS.

Well, you must hurry, then—
Remember this, we will begin quite early,—
Long before dark,—and keep it up until
The cocks shall add their voices to our music.

Exeunt.

SCENE II.

A vast banquet hall in the Imperial palace. In the foreground are massive hewn columns. In the background are golden and silken arras, together with exotic plants, and grape-vines hanging in festoons. Half-way back a table is spread, displaying magnificent preparations for a banquet. Slaves are in waiting.

CLAUDIUS *enters in the guise of Bacchus, followed by bacchantes scantily attired.* NARCISSUS, PALLAS, CALLISTUS, *and* HALOTUS *come in with the Emperor.*

Digitized by Google

Chorus of Bacchantes.

Eyes, feet, and hearts dance lightly,
Sorrow forever is fled,
Blown from our view; while brightly
Sunshine around us is shed.

Grief like a cloud has vanished,
Leaving no shade on the sward;
Thoughts save of pleasure are banished,—
The wine-cup displaces the sword.

Coldness is fled, like a vapor;
Bacchus, with glances of fire,
Kindles love's slight timid taper;
It flares up, the torch of desire.

Bacchantes and male attendants together.

Hail to thee, our noble master!
Prince of joy, and god of wine,
Hearts beat lighter, fuller, faster,
'Neath thy influence divine.

CLAUDIUS, *who is flushed with wine, yet scarcely intoxicated.*

Somehow it seems to me they're out of tune,
Or it may be my nerves. Away with that!

Digitized by Google

Bring me some wine, I need an ocean of it.
This preparation made to celebrate
My victory is fairly good; but then
We must have seas of wine, and food in mountains:
It takes a sea of wine to quite drown thought,
A mountain, too, of food to smother it.
Halotus, are you ready for the battle?
Have you an appetite? Have you a maw
To-night like Milo's? You will need it. I
Shall keep you tasting at a furious rate,
Dishes on dishes, following endlessly,
Like a succession of Egyptian kings.
Shall you not fail me?

HALOTUS.

Try me, Prince.

CLAUDIUS.

I will.

Glancing around.

It seems to me that something is not right,
That some one is not here who ought to be.

Digitized by Google

I know now, it is Silius. This has been
An oversight. But we must have him here—
Narcissus, send at once, and ask him.

NARCISSUS.

Cæsar,
You know, if you will only think a moment
(You who know all things), that by your own orders
Silius has suffered death already. Yes,
And if he were alive now, neither you,
Nor any of us would be here to-day
To hold this feast in honor of your triumph.
His death has saved your throne, and even your life.

CLAUDIUS, *abstractedly.*

I had forgotten. But I now remember
The whole from first to last; it all comes back.
I ordered no such thing, but he is dead.
Perhaps it is as well, and yet I cannot
Quite feel that he deserved to die. I miss him
More than I could have thought. He was a man
Different from all these people. And, besides,

Digitized by Google

His speech was so direct and so incisive—
We had so many things to talk about.
But he is gone; perhaps it is as well.
He was grown very dangerous. I know
His strong will would have preyed upon my spirits.

Turning to NARCISSUS.

I miss the Empress, too, beyond all thought,—
But that you know. I have heard a report
That in her frenzy,—chiefly caused by fear
For Silius,—she has ended her own life:
Say, is this true?

NARCISSUS.

Cæsar, it is quite true.

CLAUDIUS.

Since it was her own act, there is no help.
It is now manifest she met her fate
Through a fixed purpose of the immortal gods;
But if she were alive, and trembling there
With hope and fear, I would cut Rome in twain
To come to her, and bring her news of safety!

Digitized by Google

I loved her after all—in spite of all—
It is too late. Come, let us go to supper,—
I must have wine!

Moves to the table at the lower end of the hall.

CALLISTUS, *to* NARCISSUS.

That was a splendid stroke
Of policy!

NARCISSUS.

If he had grown too dangerous,
We, as a last resource, could have informed him
That she is still alive. But now, since he
Believes her dead, and has accepted it,
We near our final triumph. But we must
Be quick,—we have not now a single instant
To waste. Despatch a veteran tribune. You
Know where she is,—the gardens of Lucullus,—
Send him with strict commands to find her there,
And end her life at once. Make haste, be speedy.

Exit CALLISTUS.

My storm-tossed bark, surviving desperate perils,
Is near the haven of established power!

Digitized by Google

And yet I feel a doubt of what's to come,—
Away with doubt! Revenge and victory!
Valeria, now at last you yield to me,
Bent by my will! Where are your lovers now?
Death is no rival,—you are his and mine!
At length I hold you fast—it is a wild,
Brutal possession, yet possession still!

CLAUDIUS, *rising.*

What is Narcissus muttering to himself?
Tell him to kneel at once. Kneel, all of you!
If any one is slow, he shall be stabbed,
To hasten him, and bring him down in time.

Valeria Messalina, my dead wife,
Empress, companion, friend, exalted now
To dwell with gods forever, oh, forgive
All my shortcomings, even as I have pardoned
The wrongs I may have had. My sight is cleared.
I now can see not only what thou wert,
But what thou mightst have been. We all of us
Live far below our capabilities.

Digitized by Google

I love, adore thy memory. Look down
From thy high home, and see, behold, I pour
This rich libation to thy noble soul,—
For it was noble,—flecked and spotted here
By this all-staining world, but born to be
Pure and untarnished. Look on me, I say,
Shed comfort down on my lost, widowed heart,
And on the river-bank of the grim world
Be thou the first to meet me when I come.

SCENE III.

A secluded spot in the gardens of LUCULLUS.

In the foreground there is a bench of stone, and near it a statue of Nemesis. The background is occupied by a clump of ancient cypresses. MESSALINA *is alone.*

MESSALINA.

Oh, will she never come! She has had double
The time it takes to ask some simple questions.

Digitized by Google

She has had time to make inquiries
And bring me some encouragement, and then
Go back and bring fresh news. It seems to me
I have been here for hours and hours alone.
It has been long enough for my whole life
To pass me in procession, single file,
And every deed to stab me with its dart,
As it passed by. And yet within the world
Close, close around, though far beyond my reach,
They laugh and jest, and sigh with happiness;
And my own life, the life of pleasure, still
Goes on the same, while I in some strange way
Am forced apart and held here by a chain
I cannot see and cannot break. I am
So horribly alone! I feel like one
Who lies upon his couch ill unto death,
And gazes hopelessly with tired eyes
About the room, and sees the shaded lamps,
And the attendants flitting to and fro
With muffled steps—all in such cruel health!
And severed from his isolated woe
By an impassable abyss. I know
That I am doomed, I know there is no hope;

Digitized by Google

And yet I say the words, and hear them only
As I might hear the crackling of the branches,
Or moaning of the winds, or any sound
In nature, which has not the slightest meaning.

Enter LEPIDA, *who sinks down dejectedly upon the bench.*

What news? Have you not good news for me?

LEPIDA.

No.

MESSALINA.

What have you learned?

LEPIDA.

It breaks my heart to tell you,
Because there's nothing new; what I have heard
Is simply the dull, crushing confirmation
Of all you partly knew, and all we feared.
Silius is taken, Geta dead already,
Narcissus is commander of the guards—
I cannot put the rest in words. Oh, child!
You know the blow is coming!

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA.

Walking to and fro with feverish haste.

Give me hope!
Give me some counsel, some advice, some plan—
I know there is some plan, some remedy,
If we could find it. Only give me hope!

LEPIDA.

I cannot give you what does not exist,
Valeria.

MESSALINA.

But it does exist, I tell you!
How can you sit there so calm, so contained,
While I am struggling in this awful crisis?
But it is easy for you, after all;
For you are living, and I—I am dying—
That makes a world of difference. If we could
Change places, I should be as calm as you.

LEPIDA.

How can you speak so? If I quite gave way,
What would you have to lean on? My dear child,

Digitized by Google

I beg you by all heaven and earth to try
To gain some self-control! Think of your race;
Resolve that you will prove yourself at last
Worthy of your great ancestors. That thought
Will make you rise superior even to death.

MESSALINA.

Oh, don't say that! Please do not use that word,
It is a horrid omen.

LEPIDA.

Oh, Valeria,
I cannot speak a word of censure now,
But you can see how your past passions have
Consumed your courage. You must feel and know
That it is nothing but your life of pleasure,
Your living for the senses night and day,
Which makes you now unnerved.

MESSALINA.

It is not that.
If I had only that upon my conscience
I could be calmer; for love, passion, pleasure,

Digitized by Google

The giving and receiving of delight,
Is only to some weak, distorted visions
A hopeless crime. Mine was a blasting fault,
I own. But oh, it is not that! It is
My real crimes which terrify my spirit:
Revenge, hate, envy, selfishness, ambition
Ready to trample on another's life
To gain one step in power,—and I did that!
My share in hastening on the unjust death
Of Asiaticus—he died near here—
Near to this spot. I cannot bear this strain,
It will unseat my reason!

LEPIDA.

My dear child,—
You are my own in spite of everything,—
Do not permit your mind to dwell upon
The changeless past, your best atonement now
Is firmness in this hour, and this dark hour
Brings its one comfort with it, which is this:
When I beheld you reckless, arrogant,
Proud even of your wickedness, I cursed you.

Digitized by Google

The hour that I foresaw has come, and now
I lift the curse forever, and I pray
The blessed gods to grant you love and pardon,
Even as I love and pardon you.

MESSALINA.

Dear mother,
You know I love you; you are the one friend
Who has stood by me in this sickening danger.
It cannot be that I must die so young,
Must cease to be a part of the bright world
Of life and light and love and merriment,
The world I know so well. Show me some remedy.

LEPIDA, *handing her a dagger.*

Here is the only remedy I know.

MESSALINA.

Yes, this is best—farewell!—I cannot do it!
I cannot plunge this bitter, painful knife
Into a breast like this of mine! I must
Think for myself. If I could get to Claudius—

Digitized by Google

I feel—a something tells me that he is
Relenting now—if I could only come
Into his presence—we will try it! Yes,
That is the single chance.

LEPIDA.

Stop! do not go:
You will be killed before you reach the palace.

MESSALINA.

That is a supposition. I shall go
At once—— *Enter an attendant.*
Give me good news or none at all.

ATTENDANT.

Then I must give you none.

LEPIDA.

Speak, what is it?

ATTENDANT.

Silius is dead.

Digitized by Google

MESSALINA, *faintly.*

That makes it easier; but
'Tis hard, so hard!

LEPIDA.

Have you more news than this?

ATTENDANT.

Yes, they are coming.

MESSALINA, *wildly.*

Who?

ATTENDANT.

Look there!
Exit attendant.

Enter a tribune bearing a drawn sword. At sight of him, MESSALINA *turns deadly pale and sinks back, half fainting, into her mother's arms.*

Digitized by Google

LEPIDA.

I know
What is your ghastly mission. Leave us—go!
She is prepared for death, but she will die
By her own hand. Go back to those who sent you.
Tell them that she is dead—it will be true
Before you reach them. Do not you see plainly
That she is almost dying now?

TRIBUNE.

I cannot.
I have received strict orders; but they are
Hard orders. If I looked upon her face,
It would unnerve me. I must act at once.
To MESSALINA.
Can you forgive me? I am in this matter
A simple instrument. I have no choice.

MESSALINA, *in a hollow voice.*

Yes. I forgive you. All is changed for me:
In these few moments, which have seemed like ages,

Digitized by Google

My life has passed from me, and slipped away,
Still drifting on, forever, ever on,
Till it is but a little distant cloud.
The world has turned me from its door, and now
I face another portal. All is gone—
Pleasures and passions, hopes and fears and pains,
All save one face, one form, one loving heart,
Filling the universe. Mother, farewell!
Do not forget me, for a time.—Oh, Silius!

As the tribune raises his sword in act to strike, the scene closes.

PRINTED BY J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY, PHILADELPHIA.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

SEP 15 1904

DUE OCT 29 1934

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google